



Lean knowledge management™ - myths and revelations

Knowledge management as a topic receives a mixed press and deservedly so. There are those who simply won't engage with the idea and those who see it as a sinister money making scheme hatched up by management consultants. More interesting in my view, there are those who are deeply suspicious of the underlying desire to claim the knowledge of employees as an asset of the employer while taking for granted the employees claim on that knowledge. One thing that is absolutely certain is that we all do it and have been doing it for years. In my view the only worthwhile goal for knowledge management as a discipline therefore, is to better understand how we do it, capture what we do well and expand this understanding to fill the gaps. This article describes the fundamental principles of lean knowledge management, a model adapted to provide a focused and affordable way to approach knowledge management across the enterprise with the key goal being to deliver bottom line benefits which represent a return on investment.

Not another definition.

Most articles I've read on this subject in recent times have begun by attempting to define knowledge management or defining knowledge and management and attempting to combine the two. At this point as a reader, I normally feel the urge to move on and therefore I plan to avoid that direction because I want you to stay with me a little longer and benefit from solid sensible ideas based on real word situations, which I have used successfully and I believe can help the majority of organisations.

Malhorta's¹ definition describes knowledge management as knowing what you know and profiting from it. While this would hardly stand up as a business plan it is simple enough and sensible enough to adapt as a base definition for the purpose of our discussion.

Knowledge management the facts of life

1. The value of your knowledge assets is not calculated in gigabytes.
2. Knowledge is not data.
3. Knowledge is not information.
4. Knowledge is not absolute.
5. The value of knowledge can not even be considered without factoring in what someone does with it.
6. Organisations can never divorce knowledge from people.
7. Knowledge which is today an asset may tomorrow be a liability.
8. The cost of creating, storing and accessing knowledge is very much higher than you thought.

¹ [Dr. Yogesh Malhotra](http://www.brint.com/press) is the founding chairman and chief knowledge architect of the New York based research and advisory firm BRINT Institute, LLC (<http://www.brint.com/press>).

9. The value in knowledge is accessed when you present it to someone either internal or a client.

Getting down to brass tacks

Exploding myths

- If you hoped that a smart software system could make you smart, you were wrong. Managing knowledge is an enterprise wide strategy involving every area of the business with people being the critical factor.
- If you think a software system can be installed and improve your business, think again. The only thing software can do for your business is to automate or make more efficient an existing process. Bad process – bad automated process – unsuccessful system – failed project.

Know what you know

Knowing what you know is easier said than done. As an organisation do you really know what is important i.e. what adds value and are you able to separate this from the expensive and unused knowledge which adds nothing, clogs up the wheels and constitutes a considerable risk?.

Can an individual member of your organisation find knowledge when they need it? Is it available and is it at least indexed or better still classified? How will they know that they can rely on it?

Does anyone understand how all this knowledge gels together and is there a master map of it?. Is there a definition of what you need to know, let alone what you know.? Is critical knowledge in the hands of single individuals? Is there a strategy to make sure knowledge remains up to date? What about the external sources of knowledge that you rely on? Knowing what you know infers knowing what you don't know, is there a strategy in place for dealing with this gap? Are the risks known and managed? You may well be able to give positive answers to all of the above, but you still won't get ahead of the game until you deal with the motivation of people which will make the difference between excellence and mediocrity or worse.

Data – information – people – knowledge

Here's where the majority of organisations go wrong when they start to think about knowledge management.

Data is rarely of any value whatsoever in it's own right and as every newspaper reader knows, politicians and others can make it support just about any theory. Information is the presentation of data via someone else's interpretation. This is better, but read here the same caveat as the previous example. Knowledge exists in the minds of people and nowhere else.

Generally knowledge is considered to exist at three levels; explicit as in information, Implicit as in things we would expect a reasonably intelligent reader to be able to imply from our narratives and tacit, the less tangible elements which come straight from the brain of the reader based on their own experiences, filters and level of motivation.

Where your knowledge resides

Is there, or indeed has there ever been an organisation which has at its disposal all the knowledge it needs to deliver value and continue to prosper? I doubt it. In the post internet world the ability to connect into value chains across the globe is an increasingly critical success factor for virtually every organisation. Where vital knowledge resides therefore is increasingly going to extend far beyond the enterprise boundaries into relationships of many types and increasingly across cultural barriers. These relationships including the contractual basis and the risk management of these dependencies are already becoming critical.

Profit from it

Sipping from a fire hydrant

I'm not sure where I found the above quote but I am grateful for an enlightening metaphor. Many readers will know that feeling when they log into email and begin dealing with spam. Then onto all the pointless correspondence then the cc and bc. Emails from the colleague whose breathing you can hear while they add you to the cc list and the daily tennis matches conducted over pop3. Then you search for something and you are bombarded with everything but what you need, products and services manipulated up the rankings by clever professionals who specialise in just this and motivated by people who are paid when you click.

Psychiatrists apply this thinking to daily life and they will tell you that you have developed filters to cope in daily life with several thousand road and signs per mile and to have a conversation in a busy room while blocking out all the rest of the noise. Spam policies are building similar filters for email though the learning curve is somewhat steep and there is a long way to go.

If any CFO or CEO were presented with the shocking truth about the cost of communicating by email daily it would undoubtedly lead to galvanised action. Email is however only one area where this problem exists. The volume of electronic data stored by organisations is growing exponentially and fuelling a huge market in storage solutions. The harsh reality however is that little effort will ever be made to retrieve any of it again or to make use of it in any other way and if any effort were made, it is likely that much of it would prove to be of little value. Quite a lot would have aged beyond value and quite a proportion would have become dangerously inaccurate, misleading or illegal. All of this assumes that the great stores of documents were actually stored in such a way as to be discoverable in a useful context.

Why the lean factor is vital

Lean refers to a group of disciplines developed to improve the efficiency and profitability of manufacturing. Lean methods seek to identify the points and only the points where value is added in the process and consider all of the remainder to be waste. By reducing that waste therefore the value is protected and the efficiency and profit is improved. Of course all of the waste can not be eliminated, this is not the intention, it is merely a way of isolating the value.

The methods used to carry out record and present these value chains are exactly right for identifying what knowledge is required to insure that value is added and that wastage is reduced. By following this methodology, Lean Knowledge Management² makes it much easier to identify the knowledge which is of value to the organisation and that which is not and to help reduce the mountain.

Maximise value through the creation, retrieval and presentation processes

Once an organisation has a clear picture of the knowledge it needs and where this knowledge comes from and can establish the information, processes and communication channels to deliver it, the real process of adding value can begin. This is finally an area where technology can help. State of the art ECMS³ can support creation of knowledge by recording the semantics within content as it is created and saved and can translate between different users vocabularies to help improve understanding across a wider audience. Managing organisational wide ontology can give an easily traversable overview of available knowledge from a wide range of sources providing an intuitive way to support searching and researching. Intelligent tools can help domain experts to create intelligent help systems which can answer questions and make inferences within the content being created, thus beginning to automate the transfer of implicit knowledge. Systems can also provide easy ways to maintain an overview of knowledge and regularly audit it for relevance, accuracy and other quality criteria. Technology can connect people to the networks of people needed to get the job done and support virtual communities and teams which grow their knowledge through stimulation and motivation.

The barriers

1. The barrier to all changes are roughly the same though perhaps not equal. Culture is the glue that binds a group of very loosely connected humans into a somehow coherent organisation and every change involves a change of culture. As we know from experience this ultimately always requires enlightened strong willed risk takers within the culture who believe in themselves and the changes they are making to champion changes through the long curve. Change requires the support and co-operation of many parts of an organisation, but especially HR and the CEO's office, without whom changes can never be successfully made.
2. Lack of interoperability is generally the second biggest barrier and this refers about equally to people and systems. A great deal of work can be done to improve the interfaces between people who do not normally recognise common goals and have communication difficulties, but the slightly bigger task can sometimes be that of accessing the information and data stored in a vast array of incompatible stores and applications

² Lean Knowledge management is model unique to Edward Taaffe and it provides a tried and tested model with which to quickly identify where and when knowledge is needed and how best to deliver it, thus delivering real ROI.

³ ECMS enterprise content management system

and doing it in a way that is consumable and delivers the planned outcomes.

Conclusions

Those who dive into knowledge management with the view that they are setting out to somehow control the vast mountain of data and content are unlikely to ever make any sense of it and if they ever do they will have spent a great deal of money for little reward. Those who ignore the importance of the people within this equation are at best information managers and will deliver little at the bottom line. Those who will shine through are the ones that can discern between value and waste, tap into knowledge wherever it resides and make sure that the right knowledge is available in the right place and at the right time to motivated people. i.e. "Know what you need to know and profit from it".

Copyright Edward Taaffe © 2006

Edward Taaffe is a business consultant with a track record in high tech and with broad experience of business analysis, knowledge management and change management in the private and public sectors.

Links:

In the news : <http://www.siberlogic.com/pressreleases/2006-01-27/default.asp>

Website: www.thebridger.co.uk

Email: ed@thebridger.co.uk